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AUTHOR Sansregret, Marthe
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ABSTRACT

In a society characterized by change, people are faced with many opportunities to acquire practical knowledge outside the traditional environment of academic institutions using the same basic evaluation criteria and guarantee the validity and reliability of assessment. A prior learning assessment (PLA) program has the following economic benefits: it attracts a newly motivated adult clientele to return to school; it builds on what they already know; and it fills the enrollment gap left by a decreasing younger population. The ideological principles of justice and equity, ethics and morals, and responsibility are putting serious pressure on academic institutions to assess prior learning using the same basic evaluation criteria and to guarantee the validity and reliability of assessment. To apply these principles, four steps are required in a sound and valid PLA program: (1) program planning by administrators; (2) identification of student learning by a counselor; (3) assessment of learning by professors; and (4) accreditation by administrators. Faced with constant change, colleges and universities must modify their mandate and assess what has been learned outside their supervision. (10 references) (YLB)

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RECOGNITION OF PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE THROUGH A PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

by
Marthe Sansregret Ph.D.
Lecturer, Andragogy, University of Montreal
PLA consultant: 304 Berkeley Circle, Dorval, P.Quebec, Canada
H9S 1H4 tel.: 514-631-0790 - FAX: 514-633-8191

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INTRODUCTION

In a society characterized by change, people are faced with more opportunities than ever, to acquire practical knowledge outside the traditional environment of academic institutions. This knowledge is subsequently used to cope with new challenges. When adults want to return to school, to get a job or a promotion, they wish to see what they have learned taken into consideration.

Since colleges and universities often require adults to take all the courses in a given program, as they do with young students, many older students resent and even contest what they call an unfair treatment.

Involved in a lifelong learning process, they face an additional problem: when they apply for a job or a promotion, they encounter the barrier of the academic degree since most employers rely on its value.

Therefore, individuals, colleges, universities and society as a whole are penalized, because experiential learning can be as important as what has been learned in the classroom.

This paper will examine the importance of degree granting in relation with practical learning (ideological principles) and the possible implementation of a sound and valid prior learning assessment program (methodological principles) for colleges and universities.

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These principles have emerged from a rigourous study conducted by the author, on the 215 official publications in the United States between 1970 and 1986.

IDEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

Adults and younger people live in a world where learning opportunities are prolifirating. When they return to school, they wish to cumulate knew knowledge over what they already know, thus avoiding duplication of learning.

Change is the main reason why academic institutions should assess practical knowledge now called "prior learning". The recent putch in Soviet Union described in the Time magazine as "The Russian Revolution" is the latest example of a major change affecting people's life. While these events were taking place, information travelled via satellites, creating new learning opportunities everywhere on the planet.

Depending on the field of interest, this marker event created new learning opportunities in: political sciences, economics, history, geography, international law, religion etc. Thus, those who were ready to integrate new knowledge (to what they already know), use also this opportunity to modify their ways of doing and of being.

The assimilation of new knowledge is explained by the fact that people learn to adapt to change. At the same time, they thrive to satisfy their fundamental needs as previously described by Abraham Maslow. In order to satisfy their higher needs, adults request that their prior learning be assessed so that they can eventually receive a diploma and give a new meaning to their life in times of change.

A diploma remains the criteria used by a vast majority of employers, but it is not the sole garantee of an individual's competence. Neither is the number of years of experience. As a matter of fact, people do not learn only in school, but they learn through non credit courses, while they work (paid or volunteer), through self-learning activities (leisure, trips, interest, sports, etc) as well as during marker events (marriage, divorce, accidents, world events, etc).

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The number of years of experience should be used to prove the duration of the job, compute benefits, so relevant to many, such as seniority, holiday time and retirement plan. This is because the number of years of experience especially today, does not necessarily mean competence, since people must learn constantly to adjust. A routine job could prove to be the opposite.

Academic institutions also have fundamental needs to satisfy and prior learning assessment is of major importance to them.

Due to change, they are no longer the sole provider of education: State, army, business, professional corporations, volunteer associations and unions have also joined the teaching world.

The problem lies on the fact that they all use a variety of assessment criteria, with no common value on how to judge what has been learned. With a sound and valid PLA program, colleges and universities could offer, jointly with a team of outside specialists, assessment services using the same basic evaluation criteria, and therefore, garantee the validity and reliability of assessment.

A prior learning assessment program is also interesting for economic reasons, attracting a newly motivated adult clientele to return to school, building on what they already know, filling the gap left by a decreasing younger population. This new clientele would also use existing equipments such as computers, educational video, classrooms etc, making up for the costs of those services and locations.

It is a known fact that teachers' morale has been dipping in the past decades. Asking those who would be ready to accept the new challenge, academic institutions would offer professors the possibility to assess what has been learned by peers (adults) outside their supervision.

The ideological principles that emerged from the research showed that:*justice* and *equity*, *ethics* and *morals* as well as *responsibility*, were putting serious pressure on academic institutions to assess prior learning (Sansregret a).

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METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

To apply those ideological principles, the study demonstrated that four steps are required to implement a sound and valid PLA program. The planning of the program by administrators, the identification of learning by the students under the supervision of a counsellor, the assessment of learning by professors and the accreditation by administrators (Sansregret b).

The **planning** requires a program director assisted by a team of representatives from advising committee, faculty of different departments, business, professional corporations, volunteer associations, unions and students.

All the operations needed for that new service, must be planned in detail, becoming an extension of the actual educational system. It also includes faculty development, and it is even suggested that every member of the team, learns his new task through developing his own*portfolio* (Whitaker 1978).

Since it is impossible to properly assess what has not been identified, the second step is **identification** of learning, which offers students an opportunity to take the time to reflect on their previous and present life, in order to extract the variety of learning already acquired. This is best done through a *portfolio development course* (Sansregret c & d), considered as the "method of choice" (Knapp & Jacobs; Forrest; Menson). It also serves as orientation process towards career projects and towards what needs to be studied.

Through the identification step with the *portfolio* development, counselors are in a position to verify the variety of learning and, with the student, decide the portion of learning that is in relation to the program of studies.

The third step is the **evaluation** of learning. From what has been identified in the *portfolio,* assessors will determine the evaluation procedure that is best suited. Professors who teach in the field of learning to be assessed are considered experts. Since there are five other learning opportunities outside school, they could call on the expertise of outside specialists who will join them on the jury.

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The final step is **accreditation** where administrators, upon recommendation of assessors, will grant the proper marks generally on a report card, and register students in the necessary courses to complete their program of studies.

The methodological principles emerging from the study are therefore: *inventory, analysis, synthesis and evaluation* (Sansregret a).

ROLE OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Colleges and universities are faced with constant change and therefore, would need to modify their mandate, in assessing what has been learned outside their supervision.

As Urban Whitaker said in his opening speech at Spring Arbor College in Michigan (January 1991): "We have to have basic change. We have to have it quickly". "...we need an American educational revolution". This American specialist on prior learning assessment went even further in saying "...we have the sorry spectacle of a system that educates today's students for yesterday instead of tomorrow".

To add to this warning, colleges and universities must work in cooperation because learning through experience can be of different level. They could do so in registering their returning adults into a course on *portfolio* development. Once the content of the *portfolio* is completed, professors and other specialists in the field of learning to be assessed, would concentrate on the learning outcomes and make a sound and valid judgment on its quality and breadth. Whenever they do not have the expertise to assess some of the learning explained in the portfolio, they could forward the portfolio to an institution qualified in that specific area, and vice-versa, creating a network of assessors.

Once the judment has been rendered, adults would be entitled to take courses on what they need to learn instead of repeating what they already know.

The radical change that affects nearly every society to-day entitles academic institutions to focus rapidly on individual assessment. Would they be afraid of the costs?, Malcolm Knowles would answer "...they can afford it".

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CONCLUSION

The phonomenon of change creates new and extraordinary opportunities to learn. Adults and younger people are turning to colleges and universities to have this learning assessed, in order to eventually receive a diploma and to give a new meaning to their lives.

Academic institutions who are no longer the sole provider of education, would also benefit from a PLA program, especially in garanteeing the realibility and validity of assessment, in improving their economic situation and also in presenting their professors with a new challenge.

Employers who often rely on diploma and on the number of years of experience when selecting a candidate for a specific job, would benefit from what has been learned through practice, meaning from five other learning opportunities. In a society where change happens on an ongoing basis, it is the entire "package" of learning and competence that colleges and universities as well as employers, professional corporations, volunteer associations and unions, must now take into consideration.

As the world business tend to create new models of cooperation, colleges and universities could enter this new venture through prior learning assessment programs, at low cost and for the benefit of all.

There are more and more people taking courses in different institutions and sometimes in different countries, therefore, common standards of assessment could be shared. This would facilitate the mobility of people and the multiplicity of learning and modify positively, the role that colleges and universities will be invited to play in the 21st century, in the name of "international cooperation and world solidarity".

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